

Preparing Healthful Ethnic Foods¹

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Introduction

Eating a variety of nutrient-rich foods helps you get the nutrients you need to look and feel your best. One tasty way to increase variety in your food choices is to include ethnic foods like Chinese, Mexican, Italian, Greek, and others. How do you know that you are making healthy choices when you eat these foods?

Making Ethnic Food Choices

Whether you're eating out or cooking at home, you can use the healthy eating guidelines from MyPlate to make food choices that will keep you feeling your best. MyPlate emphasizes plant foods, including whole grains, fruits, and vegetables, with moderate amounts of dairy products and protein foods.

Grain foods provide lots of opportunities to make ethnic choices such as rice, pasta, and bagels, all of which are familiar to most Americans. But have you tried Indian basmati rice, North African couscous, or Asian rice noodles? Pita bread or bagels can be sandwich alternatives, and barley or bulgur wheat can be used for a tasty "starch" side dish. To get the fiber you need for a healthy digestive system, choose whole grains more often.

Most U.S. teens do not eat enough fruits and vegetables. These foods promote good health and help young adults maintain a healthy weight. Many cultures use fruits and vegetables liberally. For an ethnic flavor, try a less familiar

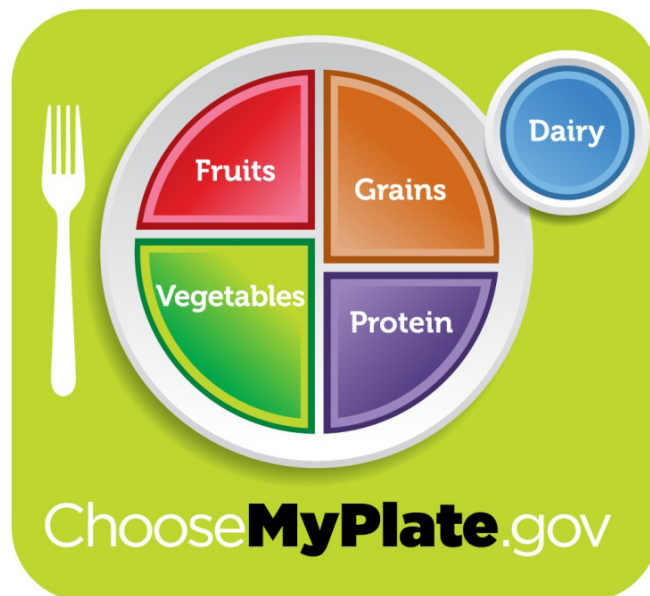


Figure 1. Find recipes, menus, nutrition information, and personal diet and physical activity tracking tools at ChooseMyPlate.gov.

fruit, maybe a tropical variety like star fruit (carambola), guava, persimmon, or papaya, especially when they are in season. A stir-fry with Chinese cabbage, spinach, snow peas, and water chestnuts provides many vitamins and minerals as well as fiber. Adding a small amount of chicken or lean beef (or tofu for a vegetarian option) will provide a rich source of protein, which you need for growth and development.

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Finding and Trying New Recipes

When you're ready to expand your horizons, spend time in the cookbook section of your local library or search the web for ethnic recipes. Choose one recipe from several different cuisines and look through them. Try something that sounds good and looks simple to prepare. When you start reading the ingredients you may find that many of them are already in your kitchen. Many ethnic cooking styles use familiar ingredients but with different mixes of herbs and spices.

Some styles of cooking can be made more healthful by making a few simple changes. Try frying in a non-stick pan or a wok with only a small amount of oil. Cut salt seasonings in half or eliminate them altogether if other flavors are present. Many recipes with added butter, margarine, or oil can be made with less fat without too much of a loss in flavor. Mixed dishes can be just as tasty or even more so, with less meat and more vegetables — a change that lowers fat and increases fiber and other nutrients.



Figure 2. Use only a small amount of oil and meat and lots of colorful vegetables to keep healthy stir-fried dishes low in fat and high in fiber and other nutrients. Credits: <http://www.thinkstock.com>

Recipes to Try

Appetizers are always a good way to try new foods. Prepare one of these the next time you have a get-together with friends and see how they like them.

Queso Fundido (Mexican cheese appetizer)

2 cups reduced-fat Monterey Jack cheese, shredded
1 roasted red pepper, cut into thin strips
1 cup fresh mushrooms, thinly sliced
1 Tbsp butter or margarine

6 to 8 corn tortillas, cut into quarters and warmed or tortilla chips (baked are best)

Directions:

1. Preheat oven to 350°F. Spread the shredded cheese evenly in the bottom of an ovenproof casserole dish.
2. Spread roasted pepper slices on the cheese.
3. Heat butter in a small skillet and sauté mushrooms until they are soft. Spread mushrooms over the cheese and peppers.
4. Bake until cheese is fully melted, about 10 minutes.
5. Remove from oven and serve immediately with the tortillas or tortilla chips.

Guacamole

2 avocados, medium-sized, peeled and chopped (not mashed)
1 tomato, medium-sized, chopped
1/2 cup onion, chopped very fine
1 Tbsp lemon or lime juice (fresh is best)
1 Tbsp salsa
2 Tbsp fresh cilantro leaves, chopped
1 clove garlic, minced

Directions:

Combine all the ingredients in a bowl and mix them well using a wooden or ceramic spoon (metal can turn avocados black). Serve with baked tortilla chips.

Italian Bruschetta

1 loaf Italian bread, cut into 1/2-inch slices
6 cloves garlic, crushed
1/3 cup olive oil
6 fresh tomatoes, seeded and diced
Salt and pepper, to taste
1 small bunch fresh basil, shredded (leaves only)

Directions:

1. Set oven to broil. Broil the bread slices until they are lightly browned on each side.
2. Remove the bread from the oven and rub each piece with the crushed garlic cloves.
3. Arrange the bread slices on a platter and brush each with some of the olive oil.

4. In a large bowl, toss the tomatoes with the salt, pepper, and any remaining olive oil.
5. Spoon some of the tomatoes over each slice of bread. Drizzle the remaining olive oil over the bruschetta, sprinkle with the basil, and serve immediately.

For More Information

Check out the following websites:

ChooseMyPlate.gov (<http://www.choosemyplate.gov>): The MyPlate website contains reliable information about food groups, how to build a healthy plate, eating on a budget, nutrition, personal eating plans based on your age, gender, and physical activity, sample menus, interactive tools, and more.

Eating Healthy Ethnic Food (http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/obesity/lose_wt/eth_dine.htm): Here you will find the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute tip sheet on selecting healthy ethnic foods, including Chinese, Italian, and Mexican.

Nutrition.gov, Ethnic Cooking (<http://www.nutrition.gov/shopping-cooking-meal-planning/ethnic-cooking>): This site provides links to many resources related to ethnic foods with a focus on healthy choices. Fact sheets, recipes, resources, and related materials are included.



Figure 3. Lasagna is healthier and tastier when you use whole-wheat lasagna noodles (check the label to see if precooking is needed) and reduced-fat ricotta and mozzarella cheeses. Add chopped spinach to the filling for added flavor, a nutritional boost, and liquid to soften the noodles. Credits: <http://www.thinkstock.com>

Carnegie Mellon University, Ethnic Dishes (<http://www.cs.cmu.edu/~mjw/recipes/ethnic/>): This website contains ethnic recipes from 16 traditions, from Cajun to Thai dishes.

Whats4Eats (<http://www.whats4eats.com/>): This site, which was developed by a chef, contains recipes from dozens of countries, organized by course and type of food (appetizers, breakfasts, salads, etc.). These are not necessarily “healthful” recipes, but they can be adapted by making healthy ingredient substitutions.